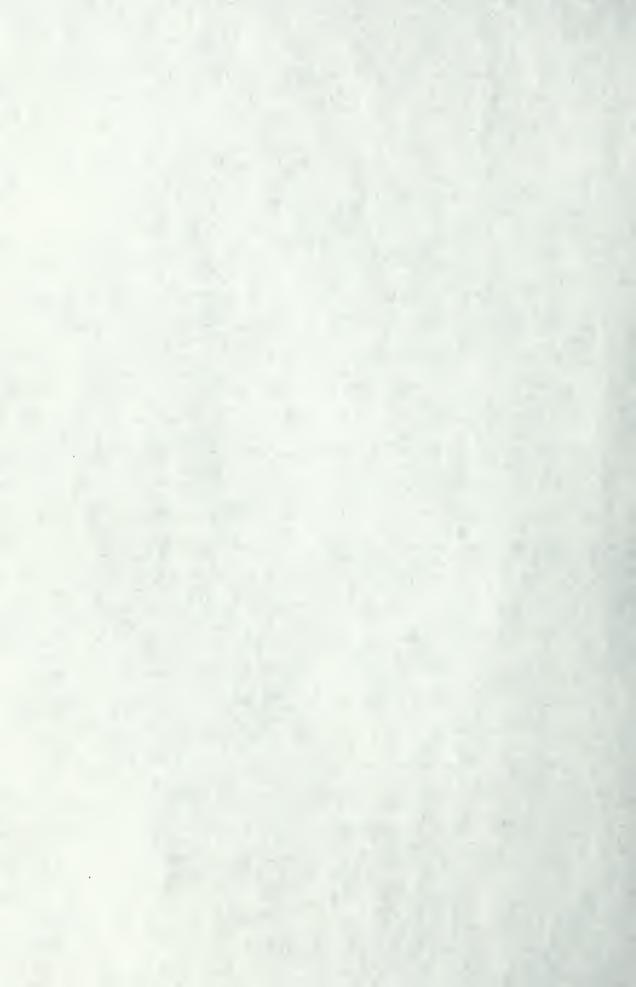### John Henry Newman and Marshall McLuhan on the Laws of the Mind

In an age of science that discredited increasingly the modes of apprehension essential to religious belief, John Henry Newman spent his life defending the laws of the mind. In his University Sermons preached between 1826 and 1843 and in his final book, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (1870), he affirms the legitimacy of functions of the mind for apprehending the concrete that are antithetical to the abstractions of science: both speculative science and the inductive mode of thought of the physical sciences. In resistance to the usurpations of the reason by science, he describes two laws of the mind instrumental to religious belief: first, the immediate imaginative apprehension of the concrete, as in the voice of the theocentric conscience or in the impressive images of Scripture, to which simple intellectual assent can then be given; secondly, the mode for subsequent mature reflection on these immediate apprehensions and their assents, that is, by reasoning through congruity or through probabilities converging from various quarters. This kind of reasoning may in turn be followed by complex intellectual assents. In the first of these functions, the imagination in its connection to the affections operates in the same way as in our immediate experience of literature: in the reading of a poem, or listening to a drama as it unfolds. The second function of the mind, that is, reasoning through congruity, belongs to the large area of the probable: to the decisions of a judge in a court of law, to reasoning in the physical sciences before demonstration can be provided, to the rationality of the rhetor, to our common everyday decisions.

To suggest the inadequacy of scientific reasoning for religious belief when it usurps the vehicles of the imagination and of reasoning through congruity, Newman chose for the frontispiece to his Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent a citation from St. Ambrose who wrote in the fourth century that it did not please

God to realize the salvation of his people through logic or dialectics. (*Non in dialectica complacuit Deo salvum facere populum suum*). This statement by the fourth century Church Father could introduce with equal aptness Marshall McLuhan's unpublished doctoral thesis, completed in Cambridge in 1943, on the historical conflict and rivalry for ascendancy amongst the language disciplines: grammar, dialectics, and rhetoric. In "The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time," McLuhan explores the embroilments and damage to all parties when the abstractions of dialectics take unwarranted precedence over those other modes of reasoning meant for the apprehension of truth in the concrete. On his part, Newman explored how we apprehend concrete wholes or the real in contrast to the notional or the abstract through reference to laws of the mind; McLuhan explores the same terrain through a history of the tensions between the language disciplines: between grammar, for example, in its traditional role of seeking out the whole of what an author has said, and dialectics, a speculative instrument meant for judging what is credible.

As further common ground, in their respective surveys of education both Newman and McLuhan cover the same periods of history. McLuhan divides his history of the trivium into three eras: the first, from Greek and Roman antiquity to St. Augustine, the second, from St. Augustine to Abelard, and the third, from Abelard to Erasmus. In the final section of his thesis, the polemical quarrels of Thomas Nashe (1567-1601) in the Renaissance are understood in the larger context of the quarrels among the disciplines in the long history of the trivium that preceded this period. In Newman's history of liberal education entitled "The Rise and Progress of the University," a series of articles written just after the more philosophical discourses of The Idea of a University (1852), he begins, like McLuhan, in ancient Greece and then, like McLuhan, describes the ensuing continuous tradition of the liberal arts. And again, in "The Mission of St. Benedict" and "The Benedictine Schools," two articles contributed by Newman in 1858 and 1859 to the journal of the Catholic University of Ireland, he writes of Christian education in the period from Gregory (d. 604) to Anslem (d. 1109) and the beginning of the scholastic age; in these articles he contrasts speculative scientific reasoning with imaginative apprehension in its connection to the affections, a mode common to both poetry and to the contemplative faith typified by the Benedictines. Finally, Newman's own area of scholarship

which informs his thought and led, for example, to <u>The Arians of the Fourth Century</u> (1833), was in the great era of the grammatical interpretation of Scripture by the Church Fathers, a period whose continuity in the Renaissance is central to McLuhan's thesis on the rivalries between grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics.

The historical expanse of McLuhlan's thesis and the range of Newman's writing on the subject of the laws of the mind admit only of the most selective approach in this paper. Although McLuhan traces all three strands of the trivium in each of his historical divisions, I shall refer primarily to grammar until its juncture with the science of dialectics in the period from Abelard to Erasmus. I shall also draw selectively from Newman's works such as <u>The Arians of the Fourth Century</u>, his University Sermons, and "The Mission of St. Benedict" and "The Benedictine Schools." To begin, I shall now turn to his statement on the constitution or laws of the mind expressed in the <u>Grammar of Assent</u>.

With reference to the constitution of the mind, Newman writes in the <u>Grammar of Assent</u> that it "is enough for the proof of the value and authority of any function which I possess, to be able to pronounce that it is natural. What I have to ascertain is the laws under which I live."[1] As he proceeds to describe these laws in theocentric terms, he refers to the Maker of the laws of the mind which are not of human origin but divine. The laws of the mind are an "expression, not of mere constituted order," but of God's will.

> We may securely take them as they are, and use them as we find them. It is He who teaches us all knowledge; and the way by which we acquire it is His way. He varies that way according to the subject-matter; but whether He has set before us in our particular pursuit the way of observation or of experiment, of speculation or of research, of demonstration or of probability, whether we are inquiring into the system of the universe, or into the elements of matter and of life, or into the history of human society and of past times, if we take the way proper to our subject-matter, we have His blessing upon us.

He adds that because the path of thought of religious and ethical inquiries is "rugged and circuitous above other investigation," in these matters we can effect little "however much we exert ourselves, without that Blessing." (Newman 1992: 273-6).
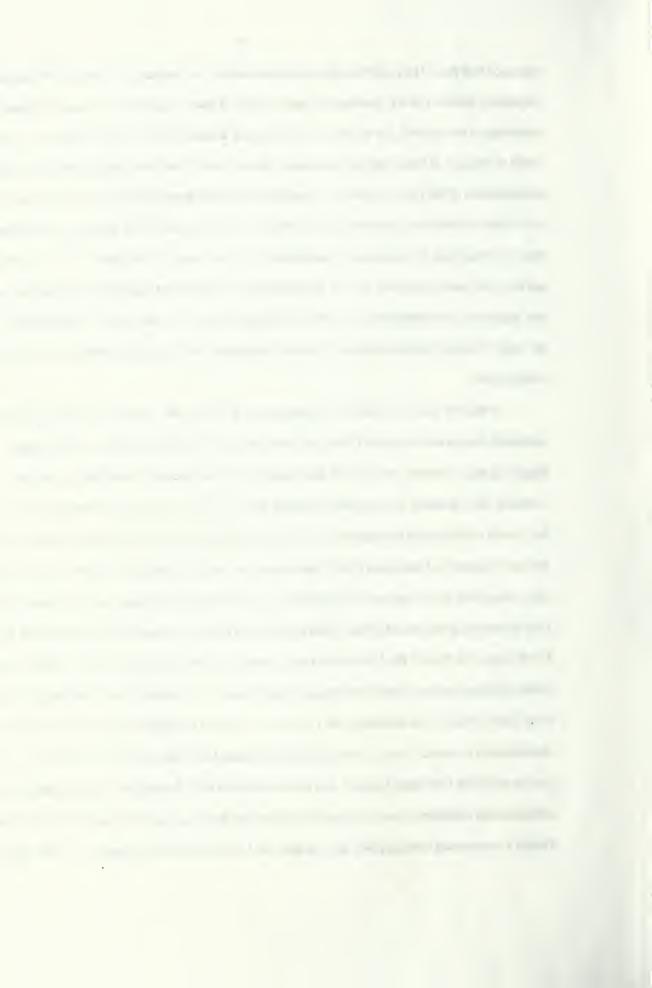
In their respective histories of various periods, Newman and McLuhan both emphasize the importance of the rules of the mind; the mode of reasoning must be appropriate to the subject-matter and must operate only within the province for which it is adapted. I shall first consider McLuhan's comments on the connection between the discipline of grammar in ancient Greece as the handmaid of analogical reasoning, the mode of thought suited to grasping the cosmological outlook of antiquity expressed in myth and poetry. We shall next see how Newman iterates this same principle in his comments on the analogical grammatical reasoning of the Church Fathers and the cosmology of the *Logos* in their Scriptural exegesis. Then we shall proceed to the age extending for about five centuries from the end of the patristic era to the beginnings of the scholastic period; we shall find Newman and McLuhan using the same historical documentation to prove that the grammatical study of the classics continued to flourish in this period and that the study was important as training for the monks particularly in their work of copying manuscripts of Scripture and grammatical patristic exegesis. Finally, through the work of both McLuhan and Newman we shall turn to the rise of dialectics; we shall see both the aptness of speculative thought in resolving controversy and the antipathy between speculative reasoning and the convergent reasoning of grammatical interepretation when the laws of one are imposed on the other.

In his history of the trivium from antiquity to St. Augustine, like Newman in his history of the Church Fathers, McLuhan maintains the legitimacy of a grammatical mode of interpretation common to both poetry and religion. Grammar in its traditional function of interpreting a text in its fullness was the vehicle for the analogical reasoning needed to apprehend the cosmological view expressed in the poetry and myth of ancient Greece and in the writings of the Scriptures. In the Greek period, McLuhan describes how deformities of myths were smoothed out through analogical grammatical interpretation. For example, the Stoics made myths symbols of scientific truths; the gods represented the heavenly bodies, the elements, the plants, and the amours of the gods "the continuous work of the great creative forces of nature" (McLuhan 1943: 20).[2] The Stoics were typical of the various schools of philosophy who interpreted not only myths but the poetry of Homer allegorically according to the doctrinal emphasis of their school. Zeno of Citium (336-264 B.C.E.), often considered father of the Stoics and author of five books on Homeric problems,

explained that Zeus, Hera, and Poseidon represented aether, air, and water respectively. McLuhan emphasizes that the Greeks' grammatical interpretation of poetry and myth was inseparable from their cosmological outlook and, for the Stoics, from the great doctrine of the *Logos*. He describes a view of the world in antiquity in which physical phenomena, human history, and even language are all interconnected as expressions of the *Logos*. He writes: "Inseparable from the doctrine of the *Logos* is the cosmological view of the *rerum natura*, the whole, as a *continuum*, at once a net-work of natural causes and an *ordo naturae* whose least pattern expresses analogically a divine message" (McLuhan: 11-12).[3] In other words, as Newman's statement on the laws of the mind and their adaptation to specific subject-matters suggests, this organically interconnected view of the world as an expression of the *Logos* was apprehended through the mode of thought corresponding to it: through analogical reasoning and its handmaiden in grammatical interpretation.

In the first part of his thesis, McLuhan proceeds to trace the continuity of this grammatical analogical interpretation through Greek and Latin antiquity to the Church Fathers. In The Arians of the Fourth Century, Newman, too, notes in the exegesis of the Alexandrine Church Fathers this same continuity from antiquity of grammatical analogical interpretation. He writes that the allegorical method of the Church of Alexandria belonged to its own literary traditions derived both from the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians and the genius of its Greek conquerors, noting further that the Stoics were the first to apply allegorical interpretation which smoothed "the deformities of the Pagan creed" (Newman 1876: 57).[4] Like the cosmological outlook of the Stoics apprehended through grammatical interpretation as described by McLuhan, the faith of the Alexandrine Greek Fathers was suffused by a cosmology of the *Logos* that made analogical reasoning and grammatical interpretation the appropriate tools of Scriptural exegesis. For these Church Fathers, the doctrine of the *Logos* in its Christian assimilation was centred not in the abstraction of powers or *logoi* or philosophical explanation but in the person of Christ; that is, as Newman says in one of his University Sermons, in a unity centred in God's Personality which commands our affections and concentrates our energies in a way that no abstraction can (Newman 1997: 23).[5] From Origen's sacramental vantage point, for example, the *Logos* becomes intelligible to us in His body of
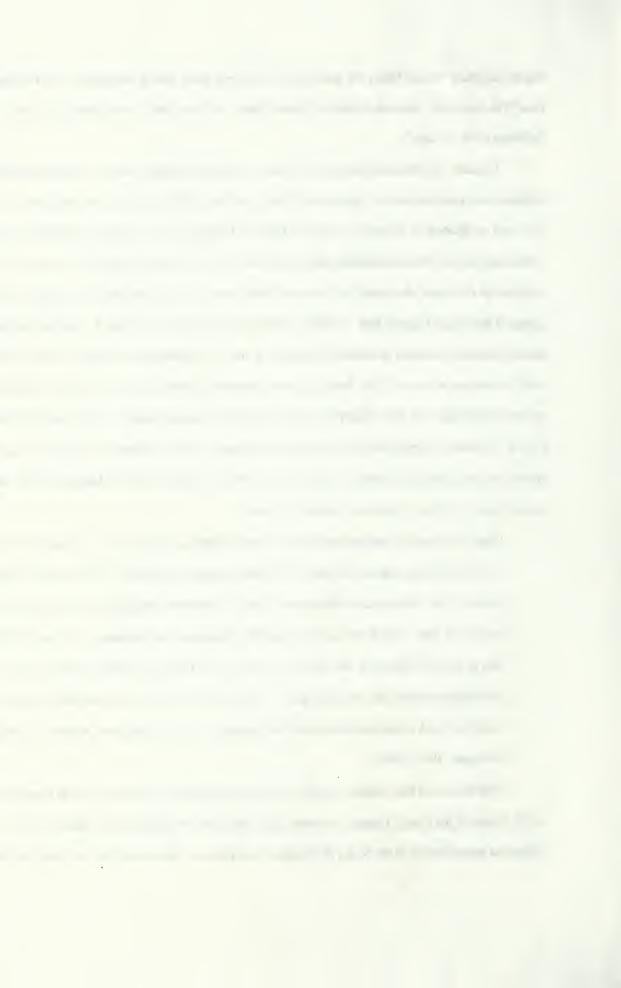
Sacred Scripture "whose letters are animated by His living Spirit" and is inseparable from His incarnation, from "His historical, resurrected, and eucharisted body," and from His ecclesiological body (Von Balthasar 1979: xii-xiii).[6]

Certainly, grammatical interpretation was the instrument appropriate to exegesis when the text of Scripture was perceived as the *Logos* or as the body of Christ. Grammar served the important initial need of textual verification of the sacred texts as in Origen's Hexapla, his great edition of the Old Testament with its six parallel columns including the original Hebrew text and subsequent Greek versions. Belief in Scripture as the *Logos* also meant that its several books were an intelligible whole. Newman writes in The Arians of the Fourth Century that "the Bible, though various in its parts, forms a whole, grounded on a few distinct doctrinal principles discernible throughout it; and is in consequence intelligible indeed in its general drift, but obscure in its text" (58). Analogical interpretation of literal passages in order to penetrate to their spiritual sense dealt with such obscurities. In his University Sermon entitled "Implicit and Explicit Reason," Newman's comprehensive description of the science of interpretation of Scripture largely summarizes the grammatical practice of the Church Fathers. In the course of a discussion on the legitimate uses of reason in religion, Newman writes of exegesis:

> Under the science of Interpretation is of course included all inquiry into its principles; the question of mystical interpretation, the theory of the double sense, the doctrine of types, the phraseology of prophecy, the drift and aim of the several books of Scripture; the dates when, the places where, and persons by and to whom they were written; the comparison and adjustment of book with book; the uses of the Old Testament; the relevance of the Law to Christians and its relation to the Gospel; and the historical fulfilment of prophecy. And previous to such inquiries are others still more necessary, such as the study of the original languages in which the sacred Volume is written (Newman: 1997: 264-5).[7]

With the caveat that allegory is to be interpreted prudentially in accordance with Church tradition, in The Arians of the Fourth Century Newman approved of the Alexandrian use of analogy in the allegorical interpretation of the books of Scripture which he says "themselves have certainly an allegorical

structure, and seem to countenance and invite an allegorical interpretation." This kind of simultaneous, multilevelled interpretation through allegory, parable, types, and etymological meanings of patristic exegesis belongs not to the systematic reasoning of philosophy, logic, or dialectics but to the foundational language discipline in antiquity; that is, to grammar as the interpreter of literature's mode of reasoning in its converging connections of part with part.
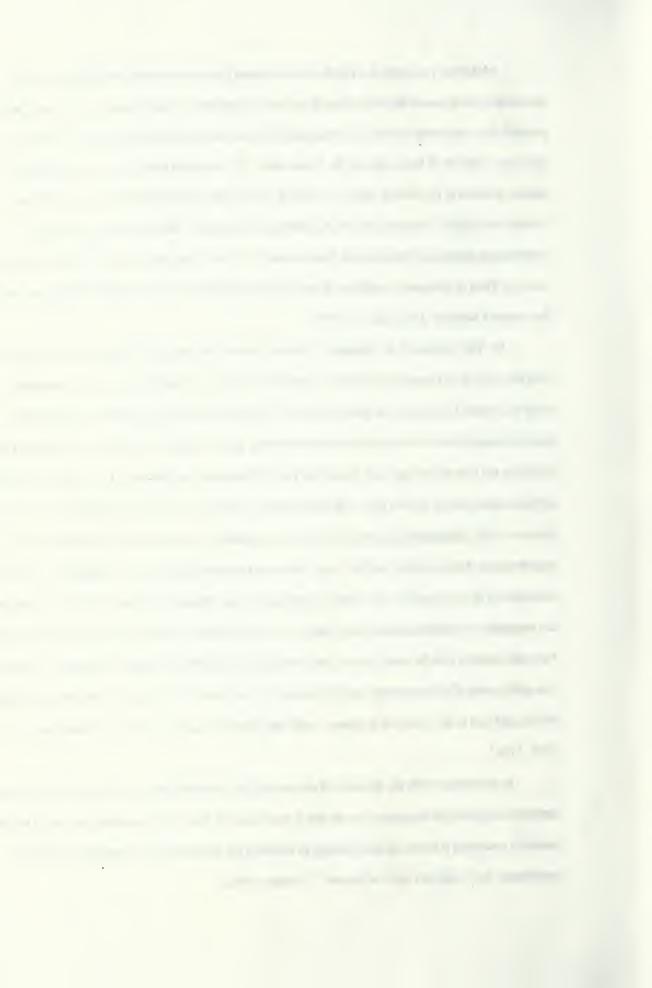
Throughout the centuries from the end of the patristic era to the beginnings of the speculative science of theology, both Newman and McLuhan claim that, contrary to received opinion, the grammatical study of the classics continued to flourish because of its connection to the grammatical reading of Scripture. In 1859 in "The Schools of St. Benedict," Newman observes that this claim is contrary to the position taken by nineteenth-century historians. Nearly eighty years later, McLuhan continues the same battle as he takes pains to document carefully the continuity of the study of the classics; in aid of his argument, McLuhan enlists the then recent studies on the Middle Ages of Etienne Gilson.

As McLuhan and Newman trace the study of the classics in this period of the Middle Ages, their historical references are very similar. Both refer largely to the same historical personages; their sources draw on common original documents such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and the Chronicles of St. Gall; both Newman and McLuhan refer to lists of the contents of libraries and cite from letters in the period as proof of the continued vitality of the grammatical study of the classics. They refer to the transmission of classical culture to England through Augustine of Canterbury sent by Pope Gregory in 596; through Theodore, the Greek monk, and the abbot, Hadrian, who was sent from Africa and was both skilful in the Greek and Latin tongues and well-versed in Scripture; through Adhelm (d. 709) whose letters abound in quotations from the Latin authors and who understood that his encyclopedic education was necessary to the learned grammatical exegesis of Scripture. Newman and McLuhan both describe the transmission of this culture by Alcuin through Charlemagne's invitation in 781 to organize courses of higher studies in France. Both also describe the civilizing influence in the eighth century on German and Frankish culture of St. Boniface who was educated in England, wrote a grammar, and "seems to have known Virgil by heart" (McLuhan: 121).

McLuhan's purpose in all of this is to continue his examination of the Renaissance from what preceded it and to assert the uninterrupted tradition of grammar or the classics not only throughout this period before scholasticism but also throughout the scholastic period itself in figures like John of Salisbury, Vincent of Beauvais, and St. Bonaventure. He concludes that the exclusive, continuous, and intense devotion in the Middle Ages to "the allegorical modes of interpretation and symbolization" is "clearly the result of focussing the art of grammar on Scripture." Insisting on the continuity of grammatical analogical interpretation from antiquity, he adds: "But the fact remains that "Chrysippus or Varro or Pliny or Donatus would have found nothing in the literary modes of the Middle Ages with which they weren't familiar" (McLuhan: 138-9).

In "The Mission of St. Benedict," Newman asserts that the study of grammar was meant to help with the copying of manuscripts which, he emphasizes, was a manual labour: like everything else, this work was meant to subserve the individual monk's relation with God on his path to salvation. His purpose throughout the two articles on the Benedictine period, which were to have been followed by an article on the Dominican age, was to contrast two different laws or functions of the mind characteristic of religious education in the two ages. The Benedictines were taken as a type for faith which, as Newman observes in the Grammar of Assent, relies on the imagination in connection to the affections for its apprehension of the concrete and particular. In a world grounded in the vast, comprehensive, cosmic coherence of divine causality, the monk's contemplation was effected not through the intellect but through the imaginative or poetic apprehension, one by one, of particulars understood each in its relation to God. Newman remarks that the monk did not have to engage in scientific reasoning, to analyze or attempt a "comprehension of this multiform world," because he "recognizes but one cause in nature and in human affairs, and that is the First and Supreme," referring whatever happens to His will (Newman, vol. 3, 1948: 310).[8]

In accordance with the diversity of the laws of the mind and their specific purposes, Newman contrasts this poetic or imaginative mode that is the vehicle of faith with speculative science. The role of scientific reasoning is to mount above things to establish the relation of parts through intellectual connections in a "complex unity of system." Newman writes:
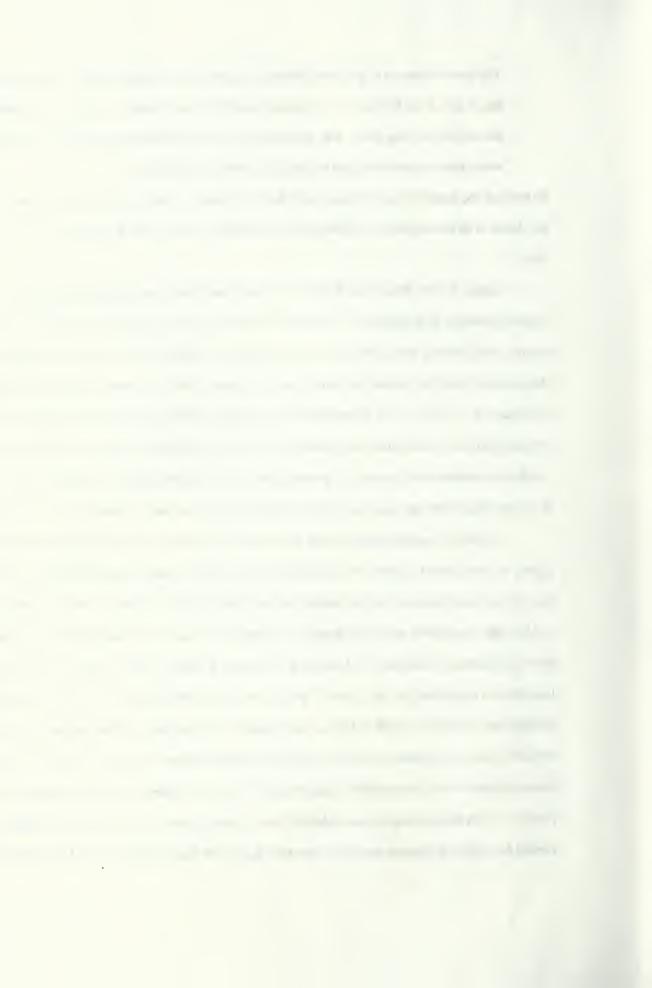
The aim of science is to get a hold of things, to grasp them, to handle them, to comprehend them, that is (to use the familiar term), to *master* them (Newman's italics), or to be superior to them. Its success lies in being able to draw a line round them, and to tell where each of them is to be found within that circumference, and how each lies relatively to all the rest."

To this end, the scientific reason "investigates, analyzes, numbers, weighs, measures, ascertains, locates, the objects of its contemplation, and thus gains a scientific knowledge of them" (Newman, vol. 3, 1948: 253-4).

Finally, in "The Benedictine Schools" Newman traces the gradual progression towards scientific reasoning amongst the Benedictines. This scientific reasoning that distinguishes parts and their relations, typified in the theology of the Dominican order, came to be demanded by new needs, when "[h]ard-headed objectors were not to be subdued by the reverence for antiquity and the amenities of polite literature" (Newman, vol. 3, 1948: 331-2). Notwithstanding, in religious education, both science and poetry must coexist, speculative science must be grounded in faith. In the Grammar of Assent, Newman asserts that as "intellect is common to all men as well as imagination, every religious man is to a certain extent a theologian, and no theology can start or thrive without the initiative and abiding presence of religion" (93).

As Newman and McLuhan describe the advent of speculative thought through representative figures like Anselm and Abelard, both recognize the need for this mode of reasoning adapted to resolving new controversies. However, just as Newman asserted that speculative theology must be grounded in faith, so McLuhan observes the need for dialectics and grammar to remain within their rightful provinces and in their right relation to each other. McLuhan depicts Abelard as living "at a time when much progress had been made in organizing the huge corpus of patristic writing" and he remarks that "it was an inevitable step that dialectics should be brought to bear on the resolution of the seeming contradictions of accepted authorities, once the material had been organized by the grammarians" (McLuhan: 201-2). He writes that Abelard seems to have been perfectly aware that the "free word-by-word, line-by-line exegesis of patristic *ennaratio*" with its etymological and analogical levels of signification was unrivalled as a pedagogical method for imparting doctrine, but at the same time he realized that this method "could not possibly satisfy
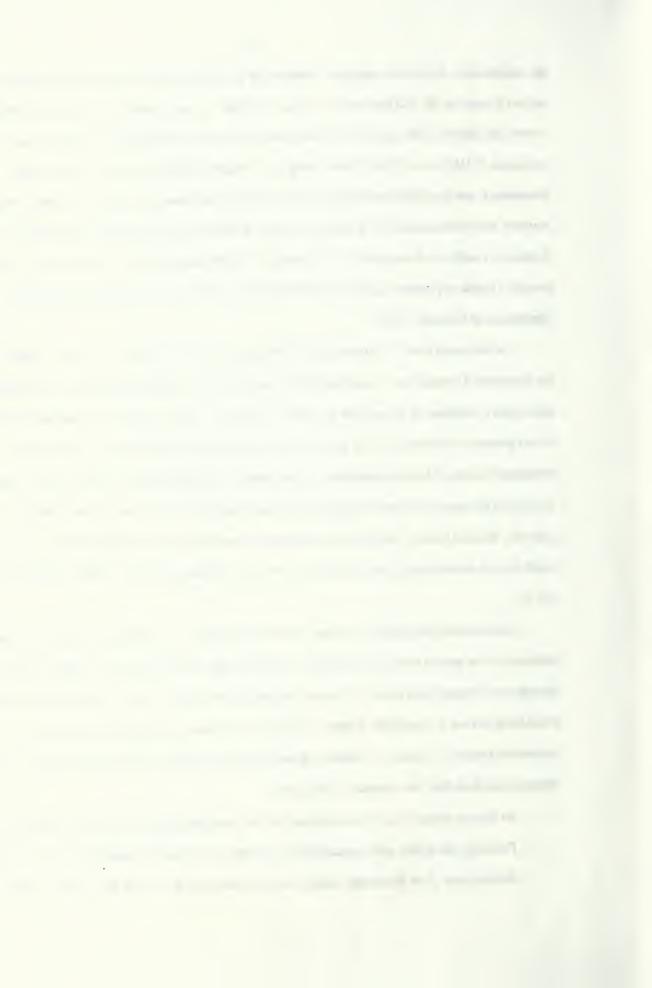
the requirements of systematic doctrine." Instead, "he set as his task to discover truth by examining the various statements that had been made on a given problem....to seek, behind the statements of many writers, the identical truth which they all faced, some stating it more adequately than others, some misstating it" (McLuhan: 203-4)[9] Anticipating the reinvigoration of grammatical exegesis in the Renaissance and the establishment of grammar schools for this purpose, McLuhan continues: "When, however, after three centuries of doctrinal organization and disputation, the dialecticians had shown themselves unable to advance piety or to instruct the faithful, the grammarians, who had not ceased to provide a hostile opposition, rapidly regained the interest and attention of the learned world. That...is the significance of Erasmus" (203).

In the period from Abelard to Erasmus, McLuhan follows the development of the rivalries between the disciplines. Grammarians "sponsoring the patristic tradition...mistake scholasticism for a surrogate for, rather than a fulfilment of the work of the Fathers" (McLuhan: 204).[10] Dialecticians dismiss the rightful role of grammar in following what a text has said to plunder it instead for proof of their own pre-established theories. McLuhan concludes with the intense vituperative quarrel between Thomas Nashe, armed with the weapons of grammatical learning and favouring patristic exegesis, and his Ramist opponent, Richard Harvey, who held to scholastic positions. McLuhan comments that "the Civil War which lay just ahead did not conclude the matter. It is not yet concluded, nor is it likely to be" (McLuhan: 393-4).

In the nineteenth century, Newman could offer from his own experience an illustration of the continuity of the quarrel between speculative reasoning and the grammatical interpretation of patristic thought made evident when the laws of one are imposed on the other. In a thinly-veiled allusion to his own initial futile labours in reading the Fathers, he refers to a man seeking to make them, especially the Apostolical Fathers, "evidence for modern dogmas, instead of throwing his mind upon their text, and drawing from them their own doctrines." He writes:

> we know a person who, when he entered on them, read and analyzed Ignatius, Barnabas, Clement, Polycarp, and Justin, with exceeding care, but who now considers his labour to have been all thrown away, from the strange modern divisions under which he threw the matter he found in them.

To thus measure the antithetical phrases and imagery of the Fathers by seeking out in them the single abstract division of any doctrine "though true in itself" is to miss their sense "as if one were to criticise Gothic architecture by the proportions of Italian." (Newman, vol. 2, 1948: 8).

We have seen the common ground between Newman, whose portrait graces the entrance to the rare book room of St. Michael's John M. Kelly Library, and Marshall McLuhan who was a vital presence in the last century at St. Michael's College. However, there is another person important to St. Michael's whose presence is felt throughout McLuhan's thesis; that is, Etienne Gilson. McLuhan cites Gilson at least thirty-eight times and lists seven of his works in his bibliography. I shall conclude with one of McLuhan's notes near the beginning of two sections on grammar and dialectics which suggests the mutuality of thought that he found in Gilson. McLuhan writes:

> Some years after having begun a systematic study of the origins and development of the trivium, I had the good fortune to see a report of some lectures of Professor Gilson. While I was at work on these matters in Cambridge (1939-1940) he gave several lectures (at the Institute for Mediaeval Studies in Toronto, where he is director of studies) on the continuity of classical studies in the Middle Ages. Professor Gilson returned to France some months before its fall, and nothing has been heard from him since. These lectures, among the last he gave in this country, are of the greatest interest. Although they are not primarily concerned with the trivium, they are full of the most stimulating and helpful insights into the tangled subjects of grammar and dialectics, and have helped to clarify several points by which I had long been puzzled.

At a moment in the early 1940's, in the decade before their paths were to intersect at St. Michael's College, McLuhan pays high tribute to Gilson. He speaks of Professor Gilson's great scholarship and adds in his praise that if the two sections of his thesis where he has drawn in particular on Gilson's work have "some merit undetectable in the rest of this study, I wish that all credit for it should go to Professor Gilson" (McLuhan: 115-6).

Notes

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1. Newman, John Henry. An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent, introd. Nicholas Lash. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame P., 1992.

2. McLuhan, Herbert Marshall. "The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of his Time," unpublished doctoral thesis. Cambridge, England: 1943.

3. In his discussion of formal assent in the Grammar of Assent, Newman refers similarly to our capacity for reasoning about the universe, "according to the meaning of the word, as one whole," and about "the *summa rerum*...constructed on definite principles and laws." The capacity for reasoning from one part to another suggests some "real intrinsic connexion of part with part" (210).

4. Newman, John Henry. The Arians of the Fourth Century. London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1876.

5. Newman, John Henry. "The Influence of Natural and Revealed Religion Respectively" and "Implicit and Explicit Reason" in Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843. ed. Mary Katherine Tillman. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1997.

6. Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. Preface, Origen, ed., Rowan A. Greer. New York: Paulist Press, 1979 xii-xiii.

7. Newman, "Implicit and Explicit Reason," Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843, 264-5.

8. Newman, John Henry. Essays and Sketches, (vols. 2, 3) ed. Charles Frederick Harrold. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948.

9. McLuhan cites from R.P. McKeon, "Renaissance and Method in Philosophy," Studies in the History of Ideas, vol. iii, (New York, 1935) 80.

10. McLuhan cites from McKeon, 81.